

San Antonio Missions

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

San Antonio Missions
National Historical Park



Mission Nuestra Señora de la Purísima Concepción de Acuña

English



Enduring time and elements for 250 years, Mission Concepción stands as one of the country’s oldest original stone churches. But mortar and stone are not all that remain of the vibrant mission community. Though the mission served as a religious center, missionaries provided much more than spiritual guidance. They instructed inhabitants to function as a European community. By combining the teachings of Catholic Spain with native cultures, mission life gave rise to the unique culture of modern-day South Texas. Look closer and enter a portal to our past and a connection to our present.

Blending Cultures, Building Community

Imagine life as a hunter-gatherer.

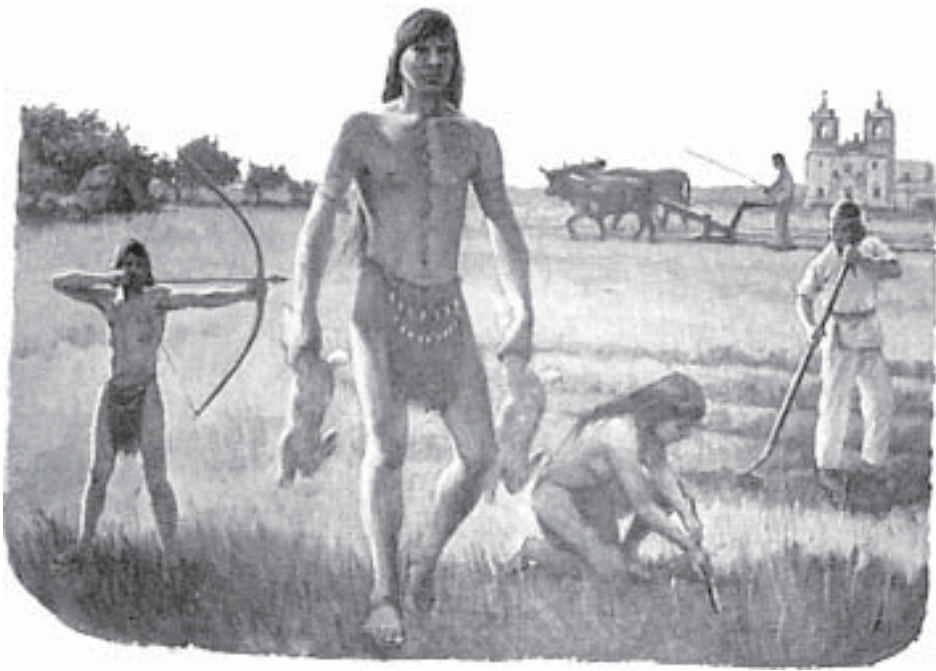
Days are spent in a relentless search for food, and nights are filled with the endless sky above. Survival depends on the mercy of the wilderness and one's ability to reap its bounty and to endure its scarcity.

This was the world of the Native Americans of South Texas before the arrival of the Europeans. The Coahuiltecans (*kwa-weel-te-kans*), rich in tradition, were people of survival, in harsh harmony with their environment.

The arrival of Europeans brought devastating diseases and irreversible change, threatening American Indian lifeways. Mission living offered a chance for survival, which these people seized.

Carrying the traditions of Catholic Spain, Franciscan missionaries taught the Coahuiltecans how to manipulate the land in order to live in a permanent settlement. Mission Indians learned to farm and ranch, and to quarry and build with stone. By combining these new skills with their hunting and gathering past, they provided their mission community with a stable food supply. They created stone living quarters that sheltered their descendants for generations. And, they built their new spiritual center – the church.

As hunter-gatherers, they had existed in small, scattered bands. When Coahuiltecans joined the mission, the Friar used the tenets of the Catholic faith to teach them a new way of life. Mission leaders introduced stationary, year-round community living.



Religion – Teaching a New Sense of Community



Franciscan friars aspired to teach community harmony through the Catholic sacraments of baptism, communion, reconciliation, confirmation, and marriage.

For example, during baptism parents selected *padrinos*, or godparents, for their child. If the parents died, responsibility for the child's welfare fell on the *padrinos*, whether blood relations or not. This practice connected the larger community through a shared responsibility for its members.

Trusting in the united group and learning specialized skills, the mission inhabitants protected, sheltered, fed, and clothed each other. By combining these efforts, they achieved a sense of security they had lost. But they also paid a price.

Upon entering the mission, Coahuiltecan were expected to give up their own religion, culture, and traditions – even their names. They were expected to become Spanish. Despite this, elements of their native lifeways blended with Spanish and Catholic cultures. Today this blend comprises the rich cultural heritage of San Antonio.

Mission Concepción Today

It has been 250 years since the mission Indians laid the last stone for their church. Except for the gradual disappearance of the colorful frescos, little of its appearance has changed . . . and none of its importance to the community.



Religious services are still held at Mission Concepción. Evidence of seasonal decorations may be seen in the church's interior.



Serving as headquarters for several Texas missions, Mission Concepción housed the Father President's office. (Closed)

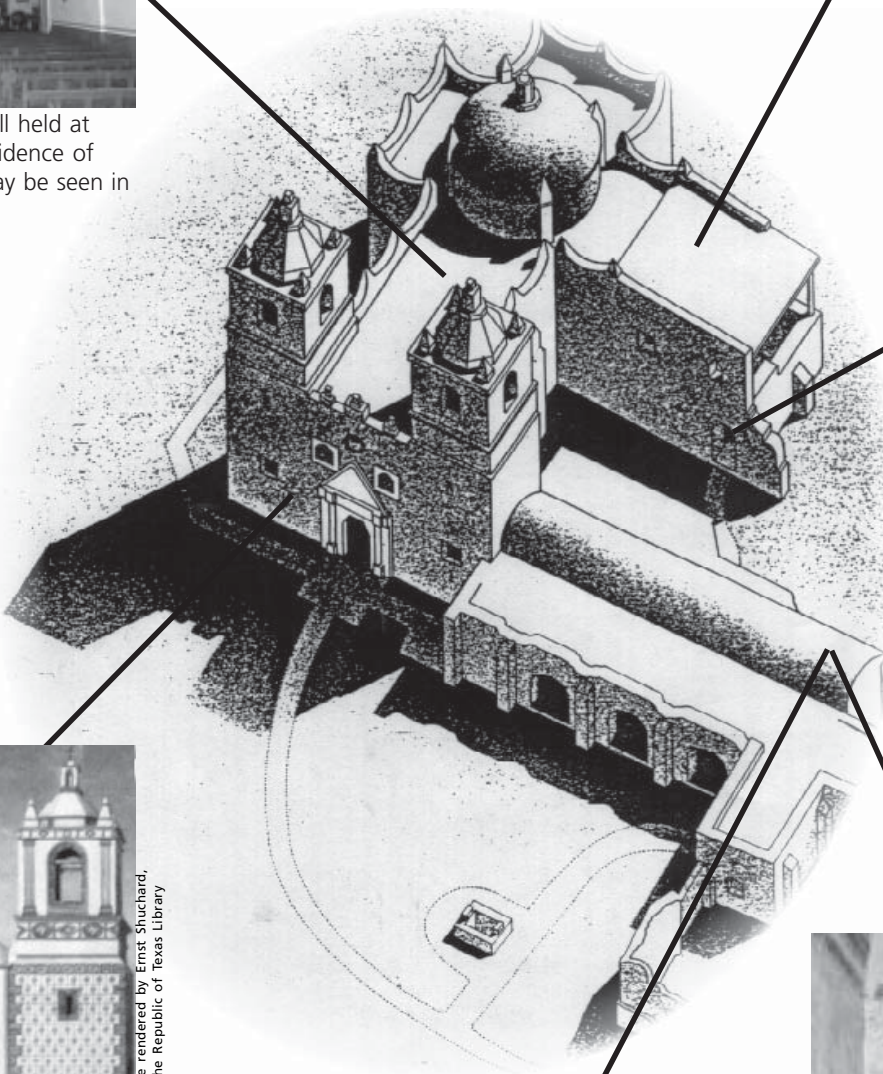


The steps to the Father President's office hint of the Moorish influence in Spanish architecture.

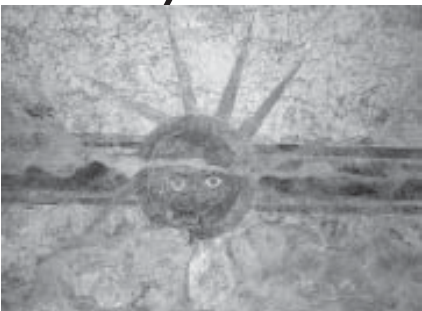


Brightly painted almost 250 years ago in elaborate frescos, the weathered facade still contains traces of its colorful past.

Frescoed facade rendered by Ernst Shuchard, Daughters of the Republic of Texas Library



The extensive art inside the buildings contains a blending of Christian, Spanish, and Native art elements. Experts restored original frescos on the convento walls and ceiling in 1988. The convento served as living and office space for the missionary.



To protect these structures, please do not sit, lean, or stand on the historic walls and well, and the quarry stones.